DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 247 526 CS 007 659

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TITLE The Lexical Cohesion of Combined and Decombined Sentences.
PUB DATE [84]
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Cohesion (Written Composition); *Discourse Analysis; Language Patterns; *Lexicology; Paragraph Composition; Semantics; *Sentence Combining; *Sentence Structure; Structural Grammar; *Syntax

ABSTRACT

In order to account for the ways in which combined and decombined sentences work, and to determine why some texts are perceived as being well-written and others are perceived as poor and ineffective, 11 texts were selected for distribution to students for ranking, all on the same topic--the Civil War. Overall, students ranked Bruce Catton's "Grant and Lee at Appomattox" as the best and it became the experimental text. The sentences in this piece were decombined--to reduce the fluidity of the writing--and then submitted to students, who ranked the text near the middle of the 11 sample texts. Next, students read and rewrote the decombined text, taking into account instructor recommendations regarding substitution, conjunction, and subordination. These student-recombined texts were then given to another group of students, who ranked the ones that were most like the Catton original the highest. Analysis of original and recombined texts, to discover patterns that related to the arrangement of lexical sets to good writing, was inconclusive. A survey of students to determine features that accounted for the quality of the text indicated that the words "it" and "and" are significant. It seems that the small words provide the key link between the meaning and wording systems of a languge. (CRH)

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The Lexical Cohesion of Combined and Decombined Sentences

James C. Addison, Jr.

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The Lexical Cohesion of Combined and Decombined Sentences

Any text, any passage that forms a unified whole, by definition has texture. Texture may be explained by examining a text's linguistic features or constituents. One prime feature is cohesion, by which we mean a semantic concept referring to "relations of meaning that exist within a text and that define it as a text" (Halliday and Hasan, 1976, p. 8). More specifically, by cohesion we refer to certain "non-structural text-forming relations" (p. 7). These are relations other than the structural ones of clause, phrase, and sentence.

Taken in this sense, then, the cohesion of a text is exhibited in two ways--the more general meanings through the grammar of the piece and the more specific meanings through the lexis, or vocabulary. But cohesion is always a semantic relation, and whether we refer to grammatical cohesion--such things as reference, substitution, or ellipsis--or to lexical cohesion or to conjunctive cohesion, which lies on the border line between the two, we are distinguishing only in degree. Because texts are semantic units, it necessarily follows that cohesive relations must exhibit semantic traits.

Because texts can be defined in one sense as supersentences (i.e., combinations of sentences that form a unified whole), it seems quite logical to use cohesion analysis as a means of examining combined and decombined (non-super) sentences to see if it can help account for the ways in which they work. When I first began my study and came up with a working hypothesis, I felt the key to combined/decombined distinctions might lie within the lexical mode of cohesion. I felt, in other words, that different sets or chains of lexical items, because of their positions relative to each other and to one another, might

hold the key to why some texts were perceived as well written and others, because they were decombined, were perceived as poor and ineffective. After an exhaustive analysis of seventy-two student samples, however, I modified my hypothesis and began moving in a different direction--one which would allow more flexibility in expanding lexical cohesion to include aspects of grammatical and conjunctive cohesion as well.

I began my study by selecting a text. I chose eleven texts which I thought were well written; they were all on the same general topic, the Civil War. I stapled the eleven texts together, not identifying them by either title or author. These packets I distributed to three groups of readers, ranging from very good freshmen to seniors in advanced composition. These students had shown themselves in the past to be both good readers and good critics of writing. They were told to read the eleven texts carefully, to rank them best to worst using a number scale, and to give their reasons.

In each of the groups, the results were the same. One text was selected as best or second best by 91% of the readers. This text, which was Bruce Catton's "Grant and Lee at Appomattox," became my experimental text. The reasons the readers gave for their high ranking of this text included (1) a fluid style, (2) a fluency with the language, and (3) a "like you were there" quality to the writing. The selected text, then, was one which good readers perceived as being good.

I then set about to destroy some of that goodness--or at least to mar the face of goodness. By taking the elegant prose of Catton and taking apart the rhythms, symmetry, and syntax, I reduced most of the sentences to simple ones. I decombined them. Then I placed this decombined version of the original essay

in the same packet of related texts and distributed them to three new groups of readers--readers unfamiliar with the Catton original.

This time the readers were instructed to carefully read the papers, rank them best to worst, and to give their reasons. Most readers placed the decombined text near the middle of the heap. In fact, 89% found it ranked no better than fifth of the total sample of eleven. A significant 7% ranked it seventh best. No reader now perceived it as the best text. The students' reasons for this ranking showed more variation than had the earlier group of respondents, but they converged on three points: (1) a choppy, abrupt style, (2) repetitiveness of words, and (3) overreliance on pronouns. By recasting the original essay, which was perceived as good by good readers, into decombined sentences to form a text now seen by good readers as mediocre at best, I had gotten what I wanted.

Now my guiding question became "what was it about the sentence decombining that caused the perceived decline in text quality?" A second question became "can cohesion, particularly lexical cohesion as extended to include aspects of grammatical and conjunctive cohesion, explain this perceived difference?"

To begin the next phase of my project, I distributed the decombined version of the text to my 72 freshman writing students, 24 of them remedial and 48 in the regular composition sequence. I gave them fairly extensive instructions, telling them to read the essay carefully before trying to get a sense of the writer, his situation, his audience, and his purpose. Then they were instructed to recombine the sentences using the techniques we had discussed the previous week. I especially recommended substitution, conjunction, and subordination. When they were satisfied with their texts and felt that they now matched what the writer's criteria probably were, I collected the papers.

I could tell from even a cursory reading that perceptible differences in text quality existed, but I decided to give the recast papers to still another group of readers--this time junior and senior technical writing students who had shown themselves to be good readers and good critics of writing. They were instructed to (1) read the student texts carefully, (2) rank the eleven texts best to worst, and (3) give their reasons. These readers had not seen the original Catton text, but it became obvious to me from looking at the readers' responses and rankings that those texts which were most like the Catton original in syntax, use of pronouns and conjunctions, and rhythms of prose were those perceived as good by the readers. When they gave their reasons, they cited (1) a fluidity of style, (2) an ease of combination, and (3) a naturalness of transition.

Taking the samples perceived as good by the readers, I correlated their ranking with three other factors: (1) VSAT score, (2) score on the university's writing placement examination, and (3) success, as measured by grades, in other writing classes. I found a high correlation between good texts (those scored first or second out of the eleven), VSAT scores of 530 or higher, writing placement exam scores of 3+ or 4 on a 1 to 4 scale, and grades of A or B+ in writing courses. Similarly, I found a high correlation between those versions ranked low (fifth or lower) and low VSAT scores of 430 and below, low writing placement exam scores of 2- and below, and grades of C and below in writing courses.

Next, the versions identified as good--those rewritten and recombined by better students as defined by the factors outlined above--were analyzed in three steps: (1) the major lexical sets or chains were identified and marked, (2) the location of these sets or chains within new and old information and

within topic and comment sections of sentences was noted, and (3) the way in which these sets or chains fitted into orthographic paragraphs or into recognizable "chunks" of discourse was observed. Then I tried to discover a characteristic pattern or lexical arrangement which would typify a good writer (here recombiner). When I was unable to discover such a pattern, I compared the successful writers' versions with both the Catton original and with my recast, decombined one. I analyzed both the original and decombined texts in the same ways I had the good student versions above. The comparison proved inconclusive. Lexical cohesion by itself could not account for the perceived superiority of the successfully combined texts over the unsuccessfully combined (often largely uncombined) ones.

I then took the next logical step. I analyzed my recast, decombined version and performed the same analytical steps as before. Once again, although I tried to isolate and identify a lexical pattern characteristic of poor writers (here recombiners), I could not. Next I compared the unsuccessful writers' versions with both the recast, decombined text and with the Catton original. I analyzed both of these texts in the same ways I had earlier analyzed the student versions. Again, the comparisons were inconclusive. Lexical cohesion by itself could not account for the perceived inferior quality of unsuccessfully recombined sentences. There had to be other reasons for the significant differences in text quality--the differences cited by the groups of readers who ranked the original Catton version as best of 11 and my decombined version as only mediocre. Similarly, there had to be other reasons to account for the high ranking of student texts similar tothe Catton original and the low ranking of distinctly different texts.

In order to discover what these other reasons might be, I asked all of my readers two questions: (1) In the successful Catton original and in the students' versions perceived as good (i.e., which approximate it), what one word is dominant--the key to the piece? (2) Besides that key word, what other single feature accounts for the quality of the texts perceived as good? The answers to these two questions suggested a more profitable line of inquiry. To the first question about the key word, approximately 90 percent of all student readers responded with the lexical item IT. A significant eight percent responded with the lexical item AND. To the second question about another single feature, approximately 84 percent responded with the lexical item AND and a significant nine percent cited IT.

From these responses, I got a clear indication of why lexical cohesion could not account for the perceived differences in writing quality between those texts which approached the original Catton version in terms of sentence combination and those which did not. Most researchers who have written on cohesion have observed that cohesion in texts is achieved partly through grammar and partly through vocabulary. They have also pointed out how unclear the boundary is between what is grammatical and what is essentially lexical, particularly in cases like IT and AND.

For instance, Halliday and Hasan, who have done better work in this area than most, write that "it comes closest to being an alternative realization of general noun + reference item, as in the thing. Hence the boundary between lexical cohesion of the type we are calling REITERATION, and grammatical cohesion of the REFERENCE type, is by no means clearcut; the class of general nouns provides a form of cohesion that lies somewhere in between the two, and is interpretable as either" (p. 279). Another point most researchers

have made about cohesion specifically concerns words like IT and AND --high frequency words in the English language and words usually thought of as without meaning. For instance, Halliday and Hasan write "in assessing the lexical cohesion of a text we can safely ignore . . . repetitive occurrences of fully grammatical . . . items like pronouns and prepositions and verbal auxiliaries" (p. 291). They further note that "the 'and' relation is felt to be structural and not cohesive," but that "it is a fact that the word and is used cohesively" (p. 233).

From all of this, I think we can safely assume that the small frequent words of the language--words like it and and--are the point of the rub. They are not as purely grammatical as some linguists would have us believe, but clearly have a lexical component. Because such words inhabit the crossover between the grammatical and lexical systems--a kind of nether region--their exact natures have not been pointed out.

On the basis on my study, then, and because of my assumption about the way in which frequent lexical items exhibit dual tendencies, I would like to draw a more general conclusion. This conclusion is that, although lexical cohesion alone can seldom, if ever, account for the success a writer has in combining sentences to form an effective text, it can, if extended to include grammatical and conjunctive cohesion, explain a good part of what good writers characteristically do.

Of course, by stating this conclusion in this way, I am leaving myself open to attack from those who would claim that syntax and style are the determinants of success in such a text. But I would counter by asserting that it is the small words of the language--the its and ands--that provide the

key link--perhaps a lost link--between the meaning and wording systems of the language.

Appendix Item A
Addison Declarbived Text

Grant and Lee at Appomattox

Until this Palm Sunday of 1865 the word Appomattox had no meaning. It was a harsh name. It had been left over from the Indian days. It belonged to a river. It also belonged to a country town. It had no overtones. But after this day it would be one of the haunted possessions of the American people. It would be a great and unique word. It would echo in the national memory with infinite tragedy and infinite promise. It would recall a moment. Sunset and sunrise came together in a streaked glow. It was half twilight and half dawn.

The business might almost have been stage-managed for effect. No detail had been overlooked. There was even the case of Wilmer McLean. He was a Virginian. He once owned a place by a stream named Bull Run. He found his farm overrun by soldiers in the first battle of the war. He sold out. He moved to southern Virginia to get away from the war. He bought a modest house in Appomattox Court House. The war caught up with him finally. Grant and Lee chose his front parlor as the place. This was out of all the rooms in America. Here they would sit down together. They would bring the fighting to an end.

Lee had one staff officer with him. In Mr. McLean's front yard a Confederate orderly stood by. The war horse Traveler nibbled at the spring grass the while. Grant came with half a dozen officers

of his own. These included the famous Sheridan. He and Lee shook hands. They took their seats. These trooped into the room to look and to listen. Grant and Lee sat at two separate tables. They were the central figures in one of the greatest tableaus in American history.

It was a great tableau. It was not merely because of what these two men did. It was also because of what they were. No two Americans could have been in greater contrast. (Again, the staging was perfect). Lee was legend incarnate. He was tall. He was gray. He was one of the handsomest men who had ever lived. He was one of the most imposing. He was dressed today in his best uniform. His sword was belted at his waist. Grant was--well, he was U.S. Grant. He was rather scrubby. He was undersized. He was wearing his working clothes. His boots and trousers were mud-spattered. He was wearing a private's rumpled blue coat. His lieutenant general's stars were tacked to the shoulders. He wore no sword. The men noticed the contrast. Those with them remembered it. Grant himself seems to have felt it. Years afterward he mentioned it. This was in his memoirs. He went to some lengths. This was to explain something. It was why he did not go to this meeting togged out in a dress uniform. (In effect, his explanation was this. He was too busy.)

Yet the contrast went far beyond the matter of personal appearance. Two separate versions of America met in this room. Each was perfectly embodied by its chosen representative.

There was the American aristocracy. It had had a great day. It came from the past. It looked to the past. It seemed almost deliberately archaic. It had an air of knee breeches and buckled shoes and powdered wigs. It had a leisured dignity. It had a rigid code. In it privilege and duty were closely joined. It had brought the country to its birth. It had provided many of its beliefs. It had given courage and leadership. It had given a sense of order and learning. This class would have provided the perfect vehicle. The vehicle was for carrying the eighteenth century forward into the future. This was if there had been any way for this to take place. But from the day of its beginning America had been fated. It was fated to be a land of unending change. The country was in powerful ferment. This was the country in which the leisure class had its place. The class itself had changed. It had been diluted. In the struggle for survival it had laid hands on a curious combination. It was the combination of modern machinery and slave labor. The old standards had been altered. Dignity had begun to look like arrogance. And pride of purse had begun to elbow out pride of breeding. The single lifetime of Robert E. Lee had seen the change. Lee himself had not been touched by it.

Yet the old values were real. The effort to preserve them had nobility. Of all the things, none had more poignance than the desperate fight to preserve these disappearing values. These were things that went to make up the war. These values were eroded by change from within as much as by change from without. The fight had been made. It had been lost. Everything was personified in the gray man. It was everything that had been dreamed and tried and

fought for. The gray man sat at a little table in the parlor at Appomattox. He waited for the other man. He was to start writing out the terms of surrender.

The other man was wholly representative too. Behind him there was a new society. It was not dreamed of by the founding fathers. It was a society with the lid taken off. It was western man standing up to assert something. It was that what lay back of a person mattered nothing. This was in comparison to what lay ahead of him. It was the land of the mudsills. It was the land of the temporarily dispossessed. It was the land of the people who had nothing to lose but the future. Behind it were hard times. Behind it were humiliation and failure. Ahead of it was all the world. It was a chance to lift oneself by one's bootstraps. It had few standards beyond a basic belief. It was an unformulated belief in the irrepressibility and ultimate value of the human spirit. It could tramp with heavy boots down a ravaged Shenandoah Valley or through the embers of a burned Columbia. It didn't give more than a casual thought to the things that were being destroyed. Yet it had its own nobility. It had its own standards. It had, in fact, the future of the race in its keeping, with all the immeasurable potential. This potential might reside in a people. They had decided something. They would no longer be bound by the limitations of the past. It was rough. It was uncultivated. It came to important meetings. It wore muddy boots. It wore no sword. It had to be listened to.

Appomattox item 6
Catton original

Grant and Lee at Appomattox
By Bruce Catton

Until this Palm Sunday in 1865 the word Appomattox had no meaning. It was a harsh name left over from Indian days, it belonged to a river and to a country town, and it had no overtones. But after this day it would be one of the haunted possessions of the American people, a great and unique word that would echo in the national memory with infinite tragedy and infinite promise, recalling a moment in which sunset and sunrise came together in a streaked glow that was half twilight and half dawn.

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that they would no longer be bound by the limitations of the past. It was rough and uncultivated and it came to important meetings wearing muddy boots and no sword, and it had to be listened to.